ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-27

16 November 1986

EDUCATION

New threats to free speech

Educators deplore secrecy, intolerance from both left and right on campus

By Richard Higgins
Globe Staff

Academic freedom on the nation's campuses is under fire this fall, facing its most serious test since the Vietnam War.

Although the situation is healthier than it was when protests shut classrooms in the late 1960s and early 1970s, prominent educators and university presidents warned as the semester began that new threats loom on several fronts.

Among them are government constraints on the free flow of information, a decline in respect for free speech on campus by political activist groups, the monitoring of what is being taught by watchdog groups and a trend toward more secrecy in research financed by government and industry.

At New England colleges in the last year, forums on South Africa, the Middle East, US defense policy and other issues were hampered or cut short by demonstrators who blocked the airing of opposing views.

Other incidents that sparked debate over the limits of free speech have involved a Yale University student, initially disciplined for spreading anti-homosexual messages, and a Boston University student, evicted from his dormitory after draping an anti-apartheid banner out his window in violation of BU rules. The case of the Yale student is under review, and the BU case is in litigation.

"I see signs of a fairly sharp erosion, in both society in general and in the judiciary, of attitudes toward free speech," said Benno C. Schmidt, Yale University's new president. "There seems to be a retreat from First Amendment values.

"The Reagan adminfstration apparently believes, especially in the inchoate and accordionlike area of national security, that secrecy ought to prevail over public debate and discussion."

This matters to campuses, Schmidt said, because "academic freedom won't survive if institutions of higher learning are islands of tolerance in a society that is timid and skittish in its support of intellectual freedom."

Classification of research

John Shattuck, vice president for government, community and public affairs at Harvard, said concern is growing over the trend toward increasing government classification of academic research and the use of alien-control laws to block some foreign scholars from academic conferences.

Shattuck characterized the Reagan administration's government information policy as "keep less and publish less." He also said he was concerned by a trend toward applied, rather than basic, scientific research.

A report earlier this year by Harvard's Center for Health Policy and Management provided evidence of that trend, as well as faculty concerns that industry support of biotechnology research was leading to greater secrecy and influencing some scientists' choice of research topics.

However, most of the educators interviewed said they were concerned most by the decline in respect for free speech on campuses.

Jeane Kirkpatrick, former US ambassador to the United Nations, US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Hortensia Bussi de Allende, wife of the slain Chilean leader, have been among public figures recently shouted down or heckled at campuses from Berkeley to Cambridge.

Ideological confrontations

The most dramatic – and violent – expression of that erosion came last winter in Hanover, N.H., when students affiliated with a conservative newspaper sledgehammered anti-apartheid "shanties" erected on the Dartmouth College campus green.

However, the challenges to free speech have come from groups of all political stripes.

In an incident in Boston earlier this month, a Salvadoran supporter of President Napoleon Duarte was prevented from airing his views at a BU forum by "left-wing" students, according to John R. Silber, BU's president.

Also earlier this month, a rally by conservative students at UMass-Amherst in support of Eugene Hasenfus, the American shot down in Nicaragua, was interrupted by heckling.

One of the counter-protesters defended the heckling. "Many of us are doing this because we don't have access to the media," said Jackie Humphreys, 24, of Belchertown.

What students should have access to, says Howard Swearer, president of Brown University, is the tradition of free and open inquiry and debate that lies at the heart of the educational mission.

"There has been some concern here about government restraints on academic freedom, but I really haven't seen a decline as yet," said Swearer. "There is a real problem, however, in the single-issue maniacs of the right or of the left, whether it be on the subject of abortion, South Africa or Central America, who believe there is nothing more important than their point of view."

Swearer said Brown disciplined students who blocked Central Intelligence Agency recruiters from presenting their view on campus two years ago.

"This is where administrators and thoughtful faculty have to step in and say there is a higher principle involved: free and open debate of views of all sides."

Derek Bok, Harvard's president, said: "There are still scattered incidents in which extremists try to inhibit those with whom they disagree by heckling and other forms of intimidation."

For Bok, the most embarrassing example of that came in 1983, when Defense Secretary Weinberger "was heckled and interrrupted in Sanders Theatre and could finish his speech only with difficulty."

Other incidents at Harvard that year included the alternate "booing and cheering" of a representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization at a forum sponsored by the Black Law Student Assocation, as well as the refusal of the forum's moderator to recognize Jewish law students who wished to question the PLO representative. This incident prompted Bok to write an open letter to the Harvard community outlining and endorsing the basic principle of free and open discussion of ideas.

However, Bok said last week that he sees a a new threat to academic freedom coming from within the university: the growing tendency of science researchers to turn to government and corporate sponsors to finance their research.

"It's a threat of a different sort," Bok said. "Scientists who have financial interests in private companies may not wish to speak freely about scientific work they want to keep secret to preserve its commercial value.

"Professors who consult with the government may be tempted to avoid frank criticism of a government policy to avoid jeopardizing opportunities to work for Washington in the future."

The question of whether scholars jeopardize their objectivity by consulting for the government or business arose at Harvard when biotechnology corporations rushed to finance scientific research in the early 1980s, and again last year when it was disclosed that a Harvard professor accepted CIA funds for a conference on the Mideast without forewarning the participants.

Continued

2.

Bok on 'divided' loyalties

"Many professors are encumbered... by all the opportunities that come to them so readily in a society hungry for expert knowledge," Bok said during Harvard's 350th anniversary. Increasingly, he noted, they rely on such opportunities for "excitement, variety, interest, status and income."

"In a world where scholars have to rely so much on external sources for recognition and support, loyalties are... divided between the university, the profession and the agencies that supply them much-needed funds," he said.

The danger, Bok continued, is that, "we could find ourselves harboring more and more professors who try to combine the freedom and security of a tenured academic post with the income and visibility traditionally reserved for people who take much greater risks and work at much less elevated tasks."

Schmidt of Yale said he was concerned by the "increasing pressure in public schools to exclude 'unpalatable' books and to harass those who teach books thought to be ideologically harmful or destructive."

Schmidt characterized such watchdog groups as "ideological nannies." While they may not directly affect private higher education, Schmidt said, they share something in common with activist groups on campus that are also not tolerant of debate.

"There is a body of sentiment on many campuses I regard as quite dangerous to intellecutal freedom," he said. "It believes that the proper response to 'harmful' or 'offensive' speech is to suppress it rather than to answer it."